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Students Recognize Home Economics Pioneer

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Iowa State College

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Students Recognize

Home Economics Pioneer

AN ANNUAL commemoration of Ellen H. Richards is held each December at Iowa State College. It is sponsored by Omicron Nu and Phi Upsilon Omicron, the home economics honorary fraternities.

The purpose of the day is to acquaint students with Ellen H. Richards and what it means to become a trained home economist. Ingenuity in choice of profession and exciting details of the field are discussed. Leading home economists have taken part in programs for the past 17 years.

Ellen H. Richards is considered America's "First Lady of Home Economics." Throughout her life she was intensely interested in broadening the fields of science for women and developing the home economics movement. Her interest began while a chemistry student at Vassar. After her graduation, Ellen Swallow was granted permission to enter Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a special student of chemistry. She was the first woman admitted to the Institute. As a student and later as an assistant in the chemical laboratories, Ellen Swallow did expert work in water analysis. For her services in sanitary chemistry and public health, she has gained lasting recognition.

In 1875 Ellen Swallow married Professor Robert Hallowell Richards, head of the Department of Mining Engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Mrs. Richards assisted her husband in analytical studies of mineralogy and continued her own work at the Institute as a consulting chemist. In her private practice, Ellen H. Richards made analyses of water, air, food, textiles and other household materials. She became the founder of modern household science.

During the nineteenth century there were few opportunities for women to receive college educations. Mrs. Richards was largely responsible for the establishment of a Woman's Laboratory at the Institute. She spent much time, money and effort assisting ambitious young woman students. Some even lived in the Richards' household, which was well known for its abundant hospitality.

Teaching by correspondence was in its early stages. The idea appealed to Mrs. Richards and she associated herself with a society promoting home study. To persons who could not obtain a formal education, she mailed courses of scientific subjects.

One of the greatest accomplishments of her life was the organization of the home economics movement. It originated at Lake Placid in the Adirondacks. Discussions were held concerning home economics instruction in public schools, food problems and bettering of conditions in the home and community. People of like interests had an opportunity to meet and exchange opinions.

The American Home Economics Association was organized in 1908. Mrs. Richards was chosen as its first president and entered into the work with her customary enthusiasm. The organization developed rapidly and now has many district and state branches.

In her later life, Ellen H. Richards was appointed instructor in sanitary engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Besides teaching, she spent much time lecturing and writing. —June Welch

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